

The New York Times

ARCHIVES | 2002

Skeletons in the Classroom

By WARREN ST. JOHN JUNE 2, 2002

THE ride up North 5 Road in the piney woods of southwestern Maine is one most teenagers make reluctantly, in the back seat. North 5 goes to only one place: the Elan School, a treatment center for troubled youths that bills itself as a last resort.

Elan is the rehabilitation clinic where Michael C. Skakel was sent by his father at age 17, and where Mr. Skakel, now 41 and on trial for the 1975 murder of his 15-year-old neighbor, Martha Moxley, in Greenwich, Conn., may or may not have confessed to the crime.

Though in court Elan has been described by former students as a distant and sometimes harrowing memory, the school is very much of the present.

Roughly 150 students pay about \$44,000 a year to attend the school, which still practices a controversial behavioral modification program that relies on shouting sessions, long hours in a corner and sometimes even boxing matches to rid unruly teenagers of their anti-social mind-sets. At Elan, smiling without permission can lead to a session of cleaning urinals with a toothbrush that can last for hours.

"It's no place any loving parent wants to have to send their child," said Sandra Scarry, a New Jersey professor who sent her daughter to Elan for three years in 1997, after she ran away repeatedly, only to see her berated as a "slut" by a school official during a parental visit, Ms. Scarry said. "You have a sense that you've handed over your child to strangers and you just hope they know what they're doing."

By thrusting Elan into the news, the Skakel trial, which will soon conclude in a Norwalk courtroom (closing arguments are expected to begin tomorrow), has

reawakened the charged memories of some of the school's far-flung graduates, many of whom contribute to Web sites for self-described Elan "survivors."

The school's staunchest advocates credit it with saving them from self-destruction. The most outspoken critics liken the school to a cult, and argue that its staff is poorly trained and that its methods can lead to long-term psychological trauma. A majority of them seem to come down not so much in the middle as on both extremes at once.

"I don't think I'd be alive today if I hadn't been sent there, but I have nightmares to this day about it," said Sarah Levesque, 20, who was sent to Elan by her parents in 1996 at 14, for two years. "I wake up crying at least once a week. Elan saved my life, but I feel haunted by it."

For new arrivals at Elan, which is licensed by Maine's Department of Education as a residential, special-purpose school, the first view of the campus gives a glimpse of the months of tough love to come. A winding two-lane path turns into a sand driveway and leads to a dismal cluster of beige and brown shacks and mobile homes that were once a backwoods fishing camp.

An open Dumpster sits in full view, swarming with flies. Just outside the main office, a clump of gnarled cigarette butts sprout from a bucket of sand.

The school declined repeated requests for an interview with Sharon Terry, the current director, who is the widow of an Elan cofounder, Joe Ricci. "We won't play," said Edward MacColl, a lawyer for the school.

Last Monday this reporter was turned away at the office while making an unannounced visit. The only sounds on campus were the thud of a basketball bouncing lethargically, the scraping of feet on a blacktop and the occasional clang of the rim against an aged, rusty backboard. Phillips Exeter Academy it isn't.

James Roche, an educational consultant in Lincoln Park, N.J., who has referred students to Elan for 22 years, said: "I utilize Elan only in the most serious cases. They take kids who haven't responded to other programs and who are really out of control. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted. There's lots of confrontation and yet there are lots of hugs. If there's a residual sense of someone's being haunted, I'd have to put that in perspective of all the behavior that preceded that person's going to Elan."

Clearly, though, many Elan graduates find the memories of their time there hard to shake. There are at least three active Internet bulletin boards where alumni

argue about the school and which sometimes read like the electronic version of an Elan encounter group.

"There are two types of Elan graduates, the ones who dwell and then the ones who put it in the back of their minds and try to forget it," said Fallon Pritchard, who attended Elan in the late 1990's. "I'd be lying if I didn't say I learned some stuff from it, but there are a lot of bad memories."

Some accounts by recent graduates suggest that little has changed at Elan since Mr. Skakel attended, in 1978. Tatiana Karam, 21, who attended Elan from 1996 to 1998, said she witnessed three or four boxing sessions, or "rings" as they are known, and said she saw a student placed in a corner in plastic restraints for so long that she became malnourished and was sent to the hospital.

Ms. Karam said that phone calls to her parents, who spent more than \$100,000 on her schooling, were monitored and that the students who accurately described life at Elan were punished for being "manipulative."

Ms. Karam, a student at Northeastern University in Boston, said she was sent to Elan from her home in Dubai after her parents, who were looking for an American school that would shelter her from Western sexual mores, saw a school brochure featuring idyllic photographs of the outdoors and students on horseback.

At one point, when her parents sent a fax to the school saying they planned to pick up their daughter, Ms. Karam said, she was pressured to call them and ask for more time at the school. When she refused, a school official called her parents and told them their daughter was not ready to leave. It was only after she left Elan, Ms. Karam said, that she was able to give them the details.

"My mother, when she found out what happened, was so disgusted," Ms. Karam said. "She tells me she's sorry all the time."

Kiriaki Vlahopoulitis, 23, a classmate of Ms. Karam's, said she still has not told her mother details of her time at Elan. "It will only make her feel worse," she said. "There's no horseback rides, there's no skiing. There's scrubbing toilets and floors all day. My parents had no idea when they sent me that in two years they'd only see me three times or that I'd get to talk to them 15 minutes once a week, if I got my telephone privileges. They said that which doesn't kill you makes me stronger. They didn't kill me so I guess they made me stronger."

In many ways, Elan embodies the contradictions of its founder, Mr. Ricci, a recovering addict, a horse track owner and a two-time candidate for governor, whose

antics kept the local news media busy for years.

Inspired by his own battle with heroin addiction, Mr. Ricci founded Elan in 1970 with the late Dr. Gerald Davidson primarily as a drug rehabilitation center. Elan's treatment philosophy was based on confrontation; the program used shouting, costumes and humiliation as tools to make addicts face their problems.

Over time, Elan came to accept students with a wide range of behavioral and psychological problems, disorders former counselors say the facility was ill-equipped to handle.

In the late 1970's, after an arrest for drunken driving, Mr. Skakel was sent to the school in handcuffs by his father. Michael Sherman, Mr. Skakel's lawyer during the murder trial, has repeatedly said that Elan was a "hellhole."

At the trial, Michael Wiggins, a former classmate of Mr. Skakel's, testified that he saw Mr. Skakel thrown into a boxing ring and pummeled by fellow students in an effort to get him to confess to killing Ms. Moxley. Afterward, Mr. Wiggins said, Mr. Skakel was forced to wear a chicken suit and to admit that he was a "coward."

Another classmate of Mr. Skakel's named Sarah Petersen testified that he was forced to wear a sign that read "Confront me about the murder of Martha Moxley," for six weeks, and that he was the subject of a "general meeting" where more than 100 students shouted at him up close to get him to confess.

In a 1998 book proposal, Mr. Skakel wrote that while at Elan, "I was subjected to a level of torture deemed unacceptable even for prisoners of war."

Elan did at least one thing well: it made money. With profits from the school, Mr. Ricci bought a run-down harness-racing track in Portland, Me., called Scarborough Downs. Through the years, his behavior became increasingly erratic. He gave an expletive-laced tirade against a Maine harness-racing official over the Scarborough Downs public-address system. He was sued three times for sexual harassment, once for threatening to kill a female employee. He lost one case and settled the other two. When he ran for governor, he wildly assailed his opponent, the current Maine governor, Angus King, as a "pimp and a prostitute."

At Mr. Skakel's trial, another Elan graduate, Michael Meredith, the troubled son of football legend Don Meredith, described how he and Mr. Skakel once explored the possibility of a class-action suit against Mr. Ricci and Elan. Yet, it was Mr. Ricci who came forward to say that Mr. Skakel had never confessed to the crime while at Elan.

Before he could testify, Mr. Ricci died of lung cancer. He left Elan and Scarborough Downs to Ms. Terry, his wife.

"There are people who will swear on a stack of Bibles that he saved their lives," said Ed Staffin, who graduated from the program in 1978. "There are others who will swear that Joe Ricci was the devil."

For every nightmare account, there seems to be someone who credits Elan with turning his life around. "Elan changed my life and gave me back a relationship with my parents," said Jordan Diaz, 19, a student at the State University of New York in Albany, who graduated from Elan after being kicked out of a succession of schools in New York City.

His mother, Audrey Diaz, said she does not understand the criticism. "I never saw anything that was inappropriate," she said. "Every night I go to sleep and say, 'Thank God.' It saved my son's life."

In the wake of the news media attention generated by the Skakel trial, the school issued a statement, which reads in part: "Over the past 30 years, the Elan School has helped thousands of students. Hundreds of social workers, special-education personnel, psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors and therapists have reviewed the Elan program and its successes and have continued to send students to Elan."

As for the suggestion that some Elan students say they are haunted by the school, Mr. MacColl, the school lawyer, said: "People who fought in wars have nightmares, too. Some wars are worth fighting."

George Posner, an educational consultant and a faculty member at Cornell University who is familiar with Elan, said such strongly conflicting claims about behavioral modification programs are not unusual. "There isn't a place out there -- including prisons -- where you wouldn't get testimonials saying that the place saved their lives," he said.

"Some significant portion of kids benefit simply from being taken out of their local environment. By keeping them safe and letting them mature, they'll be O.K."

But Ms. Karam, the Northeastern student, said: "Not a day goes by that I don't think about it. I'll never forgive them for what they did."

Correction: June 9, 2002

A picture caption last Sunday with an article about the Elan School, a rehabilitation clinic for youths in Poland, Me., misstated the age at which

Michael C. Skakel was sent there after an arrest for drunken driving in the late 70's. He was 17, as the article reported, not 18. (On Friday Mr. Skakel was convicted of the 1975 murder in Greenwich, Conn., of Martha Moxley.)

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A version of this article appears in print on June 2, 2002, on Page 9009001 of the National edition with the headline: Skeletons in the Classroom.

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